McCoy stayed with Mason, but the others trotted at his heels like a pack of hounds, Scotty grunting under the weight of his imager, Lapsley and Nicholson pushing the pace with drawn weapons in their hands, the weight of laser rifles slung across their backs not slowing them at all. The threat to Spock centered Kirk's will to one blazing focus. Whatever was terrorizing them must be stopped.

This time it was T'serek who had been attacked, knocked out with a blow to the side of his head. He was bleeding from nose and ear, with a blue bruise already shining down the side of his face.

"What happened?" Kirk snapped.

T'serek shook his head and winced. "I saw nothing--just the blow, and when I could see again, the door was open."

"Scotty, what's that thing show here?"

"It's a bit clearer than before, sir. There's two trails leading away. I couldn't say which was fresher."

Kirk turned back to T'serek. "Did anyone pass after Spock and I were here?"

"No, sir."

"We came up this way, Scotty--and that's the same way I went back. Anything going the other way has to be Spock or the killer."

The engineer frowned over the shadowy display, and behind Kirk's back Nicholson said something to T'serek that made the boy spit back in Guthrie. Kirk turned in time to T'serek point his weapon right at the older man's midsection. Lapsley also saw and locked both hands on Dray's wrist, pulling him off target.

"As you were!" Kirk's sizzling command broke them up even as he cursed the luck that had made T'serek's former attacker one of the party. "You can address your comments to me, Nicholson, speak up!" But the man had frozen to attention with an expression of impenetrable stupidity, and Kirk did not have time to worm it out of him. T'serek's dark-rimmed eyes were furious but he didn't volunteer anything.

"Lapsley?"

The security chief hesitated, raked a menacing stare over Nicholson, then answered unwillingly, "He said, 'Unless Spock is the killer,' sir."

A vacuum opened under Kirk's belt buckle and into it drained all his new heat and life. Why else would the killer have spared T'serek? Spock himself had admitted that he didn't know what he had been doing during the times of the murders. The victims hadn't struggled. The sight of their first officer wouldn't surprise them. He remembered Mason saying, 'Not human--'. Spock was not human. He remembered the stress, sweat and fever, the same fever that had driven Spock to murder before, with less cause. Had Spock really gone to the shuttle to meditate--or had it been animal instinct to hide, gather up the frayed threads of sanity? The killer had inhuman strength. He did not want this mental summary, could not turn it off. McCoy had said there was no sperm in the abused bodies, and although he had climaxed, Spock had been eased--'perhaps the fact of your relief while we were linked'--not satisfied. The drive is linked to aggression.

Oh, no.

T'serek was staring at him, demanding that he deny it.

"Give me your rifle," he said to Nicholson. "And get out of my sight." He accepted it blindly, didn't wait to see the man leave. "Scotty, which way?"

As usual the engineer had missed the human exchange. He pointed on, past Spock's cabin. With Nicholson's weapon heavy in his hand, Kirk led the way, slower now, accommodating Scotty and his machine. He could not think, would not feel, must simply go forward, close the distance between them, do what he must. The trail Scott was following on his screen passed through the double doors of hydroponics and vanished in the warm, moist air.

"I've lost it. There's not enough variation in there between body temperature and the air. It picked a fair place to hide."

"Let it hide," said Kirk, "as long as it stays there." He was functioning, issuing orders just as if a sudden wall hadn't cut him off from all involvement in the outcome. He pulled the net of security men in tight, around the perimeter of the three-deck high room, above, below, at every exit. McCoy caught up with them. Mason had died. Too bad. He turned to his steady, reliable engineer.

"Give me forty minutes, Mr. Scott. If I'm not back by then, cut of life support in there and leave it that way until everything inside is dead. You won't be hurting anything that matters."

"What's the matter with you?" McCoy asked, and Kirk remembered that he had once cared what McCoy thought. Funny how long ago that felt.

"I have to do this myself, Bones." No need to say why. He gestured for a guard to open the door and saw that the lights had been cut off inside. A sudden, bestial image rose up in his mind--Spock, waiting in the dark, all fury and lust, stained fingers dripping red, loins smeared with human blood. In the fraction of a second he hesitated, Dray T'serek slipped through the door before him.

That galvanized him into action, and he went through the door in a shoulder roll, moving away from T'serek in the dark. That might keep them from killing each other by mistake. At least his brain was functioning again. He had thought there was no light, but the strange stars of warp speed showed their spikes and fringes of color through the the ports. It was light enough for the lovers who used to tryst here, light enough to begin his stalk in the seminal fragrance of flowers and ferns. He moved silently, waiting for a stealthy step behind him, an indrawn breath, the whisper of a petal falling.

What he did hear was a clink of metal striking metal, the familiar snap of an instrument panel being fastened in place. He shrank back under a curtain of vines as light rayed down from the ceiling on Spock studying the readouts of the environmental console. He lay the rifle aside and reached for the phaser at his belt, checked to make sure it was set on stun when a blow from behind sent him rolling out of cover, and the laser rifle was whisked out of sight.

"Down!" he yelled at Spock as the eye-searing beam lanced out. Spock dropped and the laser raised a row of blisters and sparks as it crossed the console. Kirk aimed his phaser at the plants, unable still to see what they concealed and the laser lanced out again. He rolled and felt the heat